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# Who Says White Men Can't Dance? Deconstructing Racial Stereotypes in 'Windowlicker'.

*Ruth Adams*

## Abstract

This paper offers a critical textual and socio-cultural analysis of the music video for 'Windowlicker' (1999), a track by the avant-garde UK electronic music producer Aphex Twin (real name Richard James). Conceived and directed by James' long-time collaborator Chris Cunningham, the film is a dark parody of Hip Hop music video clichés. Infinitely more subtle and complex than a mere spoof, the video inverts and deconstructs racial stereotypes, and in doing so makes them visible, no longer implicit. The video arguably challenges the notion that whiteness is 'an unmarked norm' (Dyer et al.) and illustrates Frankenberg's (2001) contention that 'whiteness is in a continual state of being dressed and undressed, of marking and cloaking.' The dissonance between the visual registers of the film and the distinctly 'white' Techno soundtrack is echoed and amplified by the symbolic content of the video. The film's white protagonist is endowed with all the positive, enviable (and therefore fearsome) attributes of black masculinity. He is sexually potent, can dance like Michael Jackson and displays 'ghetto-fabulous' conspicuous consumption. He signifies blackness and 'signifies' like a black man (Gates, 1983), with subversive flash trickery. The 'real' black men in the video, in contrast, are rendered 'white'; wannabe nerds with no style who can't dance and can't get laid. There is much pleasure to be had in unpicking the complex, layered semiotics of the film, but what can we learn from doing so, and what can we deduce of James and Cunningham's intent in its creation? Does the deconstruction of racial categories allow for a more progressive and nuanced reconstruction of models of culture and ethnicity, or is it a reactionary work, which ridicules black popular culture and grants the putative (white, male) viewer a symbolic vengeance? Does it pose a challenge to racist conventions or is it itself racist?

**Keywords:** Music video, race, whiteness, blackness, Hip Hop, racism

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My paper critically considers one of the most extraordinary pieces of visual art to have been made within the genre of music video, Chris Cunningham's film for 'Windowlicker', a 1999 track by the Aphex Twin, aka Richard James. This ten-minute film to some extent rehearses the

stereotypes of hip-hop videos, and Cunningham has stated that he deliberately set out to make a more commercial video than his usual, very dark fare. Yet it is evident that 'Windowlicker' is not a straightforward homage to, or parody of the urban video genre, rather it is something much more complex and unsettling.

The content reflects Cunningham's own impressions on listening to the music, which he describes as 'summery and sunny'<sup>1</sup> and 'sexual and feminine'.<sup>2</sup> He is quoted as saying that he thought the last half

sounded really pornographic. It made me think about girl's [sic] arses. So I thought okay, that's definitely how the video's got to end and the first half of the video sounded like driving round in the sun.<sup>3</sup>

The choice of approach was also partly pragmatic. Cunningham said he 'wanted to make an Aphex video that fit amongst the hip-hop videos.'<sup>4</sup> He felt that there was 'more chance of infiltrating MTV if [... he made] this video sit more snugly [sic] against all these other dance and rap videos.'<sup>5</sup> He reflected that he ultimately failed to do so, both because MTV would not show the video in America, due not least to the 127 profanities in the opening scene, and because he doesn't feel he achieved the look of a genuine hip-hop video. He denies, however, that he was attempting to satirize the genre. He says: 'I'm too much of a hip-hop fan to want to take the piss out of hip-hop'<sup>6</sup>. But we could also argue that it fails as a hip-hop video because ultimately it could not be mistaken for anything other than an Aphex Twin/Chris Cunningham production. Despite the commercial urban music veneer, the content is undeniably, to use Cunningham's own phrase, 'totally bent'.<sup>7</sup>

The element that most clearly distinguishes the video from mainstream hip-hop is the morphing of the faces of the women into that of Richard James, complete with rictus grin. The contrast with their conventionally attractive and overtly sexualised bodies is startling. This head swap trope was repeated from an earlier film Cunningham made for Aphex Twin, 'Come to Daddy', in which an old lady is terrorised on a bleak housing estate by screaming demons and small children with James' face. Cunningham said,

At first I was a bit hesitant to go back to using the head swap idea, but it seemed so different in tone to Come to Daddy, that I thought it would be worth doing an LA sequel.<sup>8</sup>

The video concludes with a dance sequence on a beach. On the face of it an archetypal hip-hop scenario, a panoply of jiggling black female behinds upon which the white protagonist 'makes it rain' by shaking up a bottle of champagne. The stereotypical image is unhinged by the horror and dissonance of the women's faces, with one exceptionally grotesque variant taken from a sketch by H R Giger.

There is no question that Windowlicker is an astonishing piece of music and film making, and we might assume that Cunningham is sincere in expressing his love for hip-hop and that he means no disrespect. However, given that it is the product of two white, male, middle-class British avant-garde artists, it is perhaps not surprising that questions were asked whether the film was in fact racist and sexist. When the video was released *The Guardian* newspaper asked a number of prominent black commentators for their thoughts on the matter. DJ Trevor Nelson said, for example,

What you'd expect in a video like this is maybe 20 seconds of explicit dialogue — but it went on for so long that you got the

feeling that this guy was trying to make a statement. What's the agenda here?'<sup>9</sup>

Cunningham's agenda was more likely aesthetic than political. He claims he wanted the video 'to be like a cartoon. I didn't want the dialogue to be too realistic or anything. I just wanted it to be really over the top.'<sup>10</sup> Lola Young, author of *Fear of the Dark: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Cinema*, did not think the video was racist, and suggested that it was more pastiche than satire, however she argued nonetheless that 'even if the intention of a video is to parody a genre, a video offers no critical distance from the genre being parodied'.<sup>11</sup> There is perhaps something in this, particularly with reference to the sexist nature of the imagery on show, which is arguably to some extent complicit with the normalization of pornography to which mainstream music videos have contributed. Susan Sontag goes so far as to assert that, 'pornography isn't a form that can parody itself . . . A parody of pornography, so far as it has any real competence, always remains pornography'.<sup>12</sup>

However, although the video allows for a degree of conventional, patriarchal visual pleasure, this is violently arrested. The women's bodies may encourage erotic engagement, but their faces certainly do not. However whether this actually constitutes a radical challenge to the objectification and commodification of black women's bodies is less clear. As Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto observe, 'Black women's behinds are a spectacle in mainstream rap music', and that far from celebrating the black female body they are instead 'routinely dismembered and highly racialized'.<sup>13</sup> This is particularly problematic, they suggest, 'given the fact that young, affluent white men purchase more rap music than any other

racial-gender group'.<sup>14</sup> If this is true for hip-hop, it is even more the case for Aphex Twin, as electronica/'Intelligent Dance Music' is a genre overwhelmingly produced and consumed by white, middle-class men. Numerous commentators observe that when the gaze is white and male, we come into uncomfortable proximity with colonialist imagery and discourses of black sexuality, the fetishisation of particular body parts and physical characteristics. Anne McClintock observes that 'by the nineteenth century, popular lore had firmly established Africa as the quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly', and that

women figured as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Folklore saw them, even more than the men, as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial.'<sup>15</sup>

Sander Gilman argues that black female bodies were seen as 'more primitive, and therefore more sexually intensive' than those of white women, and, in particular, 'black women's primary and secondary sexual characteristics, the genitalia and buttocks, were seen as primitive, as 'animal-like', a physical sign of an uncontrolled and, indeed uncontrollable, animalistic sexuality.'<sup>16</sup> Black women's bodies were put on display in the Victorian era, the most famous example being Sarah Baartman, an indentured servant brought to Europe from colonised Africa, and popularly known as 'the Hottentot Venus'. For white European audiences, the buttocks of black women functioned 'as the semantic signs of "primitive" sexual appetite and activity' and 'as a somewhat comic sign of the black female's primitive, grotesque nature'.<sup>17</sup> As Hunter observes:

Just as European visitors came to Paris to see Baartman in her cage and ogled her buttocks, today white consumers view

multimedia images of black women with exceptionally large (and often surgically altered) breasts and buttocks.<sup>18</sup>

The colonialist gaze is made manifest in the *Windowlicker* film because, unlike most hip-hop videos, the protagonist is a white man. In many ways he is a *very* white man; blond, dressed all in white, with a huge, flashy white car. He is affluent and socially and culturally dominant; but in many ways the character, and thus the video as a whole, challenge the 'heavy reliance on familiar racial and gender stereotypes'<sup>19</sup> on which rap music's mainstream success is to some extent predicated. Rather, he seems to embody positive and negative characteristics imputed to both white *and* black.

Firstly he is hypersexual and hyper-phallic, symbolized by the absurdly stretched limo and the thrusting umbrella. This is a characteristic, as Railton and Watson recount, usually attributed to black men. They write,

even though the penis is not on display, the sexualized image of a black male body 'becomes reduced to a focus on the Black male penis as a distillation of the essence of Black masculinity.' [...] in fixing black masculinity around [...] a 'super phallic imago' and thus locating the 'essence' of black masculinity in the domain of sexuality, black men become 'confined and defined in their very *being* as sexual and nothing but sexual, hence hypersexual'. In this sense, then, the image of hypersexual black masculinity [...] can be understood as a very specific form of racial fetish, one built around a pull between envy and fear, attraction and repulsion, admiration and threat.<sup>20</sup>

In *Windowlicker* these are all characteristics attributed to a white man.

In the context of histories of racial violence and oppression, his evident

fascination for the women of colour in the video perhaps makes for uncomfortable viewing, but it also unsettles and challenges in other ways. Richard Dyer argues that 'Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness' because 'If races are conceptualised as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity.'<sup>21</sup> Such anxieties are perhaps diffused by the 'money shot' with the champagne. The cum shot, asserts Dyer,

is a display of pleasure, which insistently divorces the moment of orgasm from that of procreation. The rise of heteroporn and the absolute requirement of the cum shot fix the image of sex as non-reproductive, and sexual reproduction in a racialised society is always also something to do with racial reproduction. Heteroporn produces an image of Western sexuality that is racially terminal.<sup>22</sup>

This might equally reinforce another apprehension, 'that non-whites are better at sex and reproduction than are whites, that, indeed, to be truly white and reproductively efficient are mutually incompatible'.<sup>23</sup> But the protagonist is a white man who is very clearly better at sex than the black men in the video. He is a white version of the 'hip-hop celebrity/pimp/player', which is, suggests Mireille Miller-young, 'a self-articulation that makes use of black men's outsider status and reframes it as an oppositional and autonomous masculinity that is defined by a consciously chosen hypersexuality'.<sup>24</sup>

Miller-young argues that the 'convergence of hip-hop and porn illuminates the constructions and fissures of [...] black masculinity, as it engages the myths and fascinations of black sexual deviance'<sup>25</sup>, and in a positive sense could be regarded as an attempt, albeit a problematic one, 'to refigure the



racial logic of sexual respectability and normativity’.<sup>26</sup> ‘The affluent “pimp daddy”, argues Eithne Quinn, bucks middle class notions of success and is instead

preoccupied with the conspicuous display of material wealth ... the commodification of women ... by the supersexual pimp is recounted in the lewd vernacular. The dandified spectacle foregrounds the importance of impression management: naming ... reputation ... and recognition.<sup>27</sup>

The protagonist of *Windowlicker* articulates, as do the protagonists of many mainstream hip-hop videos, ‘fantasies of entrepreneurial empowerment, of sexual prowess, and of power over women and other men.’<sup>28</sup> Does *Windowlicker* subvert the image of black masculinity as ‘non-normative, monstrous, dangerous, and feminized’<sup>29</sup> as defined by ‘hegemonic white masculinity’ by imputing these traits to a white man? In doing so, does it problematize the notion that whiteness is invisible and unmarked, and essentially racialize whiteness by inverting racial sexual stereotypes? Does it illustrate Ruth Frankenberg’s assertion that: ‘In fact, whiteness is in a continual state of being dressed and undressed, of marking and cloaking.’<sup>30</sup> As Railton and Watson observe, even within mainstream music video representations of race and gender can be activated in such a way as to call hierarchical power relations into question, so does the radicalism of *Windowlicker* advance this process of deconstruction further?<sup>31</sup>

Or is it less progressive and more reactionary than this? Is it merely an example of cultural appropriation? Is *Windowlicker*’s protagonist, and by extension Cunningham, simply a well-heeled wigger, exploiting his privilege and the subcultural capital of the ‘Other’? Does it corroborate the

notion that as a category of identity whiteness is ‘empty’ and without positive content, ‘constituted solely by absence and appropriation [...] defined solely by what it is not.’<sup>32</sup> Is the video evidence of what bell hooks has described as ‘eating the other’, of the tendency among white youth identified by Kobena Mercer to adopt ‘markers of black self-empowerment such as dreadlocks or hip-hop fashion’ and in doing so, ‘simultaneously displace whiteness and its historical connection to racial prejudice and discrimination.’<sup>33</sup>

Such an analysis is perhaps germane to the dance solo in the video, choreographed by Vincent Paterson. Cunningham says his direction to Paterson was to ‘come up with some really immature and perverted takes on Buzz [sic] Berkeley’s movies’.<sup>34</sup> The end result is more an amalgam of *Singin’ in the Rain* and Michael Jackson, perhaps unsurprising given that Paterson has choreographed both Broadway musicals and Jackson tours and videos. Although both the choreographer and the dancer are white, as is the music, the dance style has evident precedents in black styles, as indeed does much dance in western popular culture. However, as Carol J Clover observes, this has often gone unacknowledged, at least explicitly. She suggests that although ‘the immensely popular tradition, on stage and film, of the performance, by whites in blackface’ came to an end in the post-World War II era, blackface ‘more broadly understood’, that is ‘whites simply imitating blacks, without the cork throve as vigorously as before’.<sup>35</sup> So we might argue that this obscuring of the origins of dance styles is less a case of blacking up, than whitening up. Ironically, the men of colour in the video are hopeless dancers, which might be taken as symbolic of their impotence and inferiority to the great white phallus of the protagonist.

Again here we have a subversion of racial stereotypes, of the notion that black people ‘have natural rhythm’, but it is also troubling inasmuch that it suggests an innate white superiority, even in the context of those spheres of activity at which black people are *supposed* to excel.

Or is Windowlicker less about cultural appropriation and more an expression of a tendency in white culture to give white people ‘the illusion of infinite variety’?<sup>36</sup> Dyer asserts that ‘White men are seen as divided, with more powerful sex drives but also a greater will to power.’<sup>37</sup> These sex drives are typically characterised as dark, and Gilman has argued that a

projection of sexuality on to dark races was a means for whites to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires. [...] This furnishes the heterosexual desire that will rescue whites from sterility while separating such desire from what whiteness aspires to.<sup>38</sup>

It is this darkness within the white man which ‘enables him to assume the position as the universal signifier for humanity. He encompasses all the possibilities for human existence, the darkness and the light.’<sup>39</sup>

The narcissistic contagion evident in the sexuality of Windowlicker is reminiscent of the vampire. The horror of which, suggests Dyer, is ‘ghastly white, disgustingly cadaverous’.<sup>40</sup> However the vampire can also be conceptualised, argues Judith Halberstam, as ‘a composite of otherness that manifests itself as the horror essential to dark, foreign, and perverse bodies.’<sup>41</sup> Again here we have light and dark, white and black, in the one body. Halberstam proposes that the vampire, like Windowlicker, has the ‘ability to condense many monstrous traits into one body’. She writes,

Dracula is otherness itself [...] He is monster and man, feminine

and powerful, parasitical and wealthy; he is repulsive and fascinating, he exerts the consummate gaze but is scrutinized in all things [...] Dracula is indeed not simply a monster, but a technology of monstrosity. Technologies of monstrosity are always also technologies of sex.<sup>42</sup>

The monstrous elements of the video echo the connections between whiteness and terror and violence, and the notion that whiteness can be death or the bringer of death. bell hooks speaks of ‘the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorising imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures’.<sup>43</sup> Although this might be rather overstated as a description of the relationships in the film, there are certainly clear power differentials, which are projected onto racial identities and an evident will to power on the part of the protagonist. As Dyer observes: ‘Will is literally mapped on to the world in terms of those who have it and those who don’t, the ruler and the ruled, the coloniser and the colonised.’<sup>44</sup> Rasmussen et al argue that:

The notion that whiteness is violence and terror challenges the idea that whiteness is invisible and unmarked. [...] Indeed, one of the central uses of white violence and terror is to make a display of white privilege and to assert the power to subjugate others.<sup>45</sup>

However, and conversely, another terror lurks, the suspicion ‘that being nothing, having no life, is a condition of whiteness. [That] the purity of whiteness may simply be an absence of being.’<sup>46</sup> Hence the appeal of blackness to white culture, because through

the figure of the non-white person, whites can feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like, while also dissociating themselves from the non-whiteness of such things. This would work well were it not for the fact that it also constantly risks

reminding whites of what they are relinquishing in their assumption of whiteness: fun, 'life'.<sup>47</sup>

This is not to deny the fact of white privilege, however; nor, as the culmination of the video appears to illustrate, that there is, as Dyer asserts, 'an ecstasy to be felt in the [...] luminescence that makes sense in the context of the idea of whiteness as transcendence, dissolution into pure spirit and no-thing-ness.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Dombal, 'Chris Cunningham', *Pitchfork*, 31 July 2005, Viewed 2 May 2013, <<http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6103-chris-cunningham/>>

<sup>2</sup> Booklet to accompany DVD, *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*, 2003

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Dombal, 'Chris Cunningham'

<sup>5</sup> *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*

<sup>6</sup> Dombal, 'Chris Cunningham'

<sup>7</sup> *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> John O'Reilly, 'Face the music', *The Guardian*, 5 March 1999, Viewed 2 May 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,3831484-103408,00.html>>

<sup>10</sup> *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*

<sup>11</sup> John O'Reilly, 'Face the music'

<sup>12</sup> quoted in Annabelle Mooney, 'Boys will be boys', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8:3, 2008, 258.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto, 'Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze', *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2, 2009, 184

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 185

<sup>15</sup> Diane Railton & Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 90-91

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 91

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 92

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Hunter, 'Shake It, Baby, Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop', *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2011, 18

<sup>19</sup> Hunter & Soto, 'Women of Color in Hip Hop', 185

<sup>20</sup> Railton & Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 128

<sup>21</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 25

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 216

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 216

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- <sup>24</sup> Mireille Miller-young, 'Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography', *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, Volume 8, Number 1, 2007, 273
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 263
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 264
- <sup>27</sup> quoted in Ibid., 274
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 274
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 275
- <sup>30</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, 'The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness', in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, eds. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J Nexica & Matt Wray, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 74
- <sup>31</sup> Railton & Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 88
- <sup>32</sup> Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J Nexica & Matt Wray, Introduction to *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, 11
- <sup>33</sup> Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica & Wray, Introduction to *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, 11
- <sup>34</sup> *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*
- <sup>35</sup> Carol J. Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1995, 471
- <sup>36</sup> Dyer, *White*, 12
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 27
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 28
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 210
- <sup>41</sup> Judith Halberstam, 'Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker's "Dracula"', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 1993, 335
- <sup>42</sup> Halberstam, 'Technologies of Monstrosity', 334
- <sup>43</sup> quoted in Dyer, *White*, 209
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 31
- <sup>45</sup> Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J Nexica & Matt Wray, Introduction to *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, 11
- <sup>46</sup> Dyer, *White*, 80
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 80
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 80

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Ruth Adams is Lecturer in Cultural & Creative Industries at King's College, London